Five Cents at the Door by Barkour

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Author's Note:

> Very much not in my usual style. Just trying to figure some stuff out. I'm using the Class of 1960 tweet David K Harbour made as the basis for my timeline.

The first time she kissed Jim they were eleven years old and she did it as a joke. The Presbyterian church on Lincoln had a haunted house set up at the church and the pastor's house next door that week. The point of it was if you strayed from the law of the Lord then Deacon Mitchell in red face paint and paper mache devil horns would chase you for thirty feet, for all eternity. Admission cost a nickel. Jim gave two nickels because his dad said paying was a man's responsibility. Jim's dad was a mean drunk and meaner sober, but the law was the law and God almighty but Jim loved his dad.

"I got it, two nickels," Jim said to the usher (white face paint, a black suit with a red bow tie, a real proper churchly Dracula circa 1952, Hawkins). "C'mon, Joyce, I said I got it."

She fought with him a moment and tried to stuff her nickel in the usher's hand.

"Don't be stupid, I saved it, I can pay my own."

"I'm supposed to pay, so—"

"Supposed to?" Joyce's voice went shrill. She hated how it did that. She'd always hate that, how her voice got high and sharp, like some kind of roadkill Minnie Mouse. "Who said?"

"My dad said!"

The usher had stood in the cold for an hour already, letting in families and giggling kids, but mostly teens in packs of three or four, who paid their nickels and tipped him with knowing looks. High school was ten years behind him by 1952 but it still spooked him, like they could see past the face paint and knew he was a germ; in

’41 when he had zits on his chin they called him a meatball.

He took the two nickels from Jim, ending the argument, and said, “Follow the righteous path and see yourselves freed from hell.” The teens laughed at that but these two kids looked thrilled, exchanging looks charged with good old-fashioned godly fear.

They went in together, Joyce clutching her nickel tight. That god damn nickel. Her hand sweated around it, sweated even though her hands were October chilled. She hadn’t worn a coat out, just a too-thin sweater. They couldn’t afford a new coat this year and the old one pinched under her shoulders. She’d started growing breasts in the spring, just skinny nubs, and when she put on that coat she thought people could see ‘em, that people were looking at her: that boys looked at her and they’d laugh and say, hey, check out Joyce’s tits.

A single path led through the haunted house. Someone had put down thin gold rope to either side of it. We’re off to see the wizard!

Somewhere in the dark-lit church a bunch of older kids were laughing. Someone else screamed, way off ahead of them. The church had put up black cloth over everything to make the new-made plywood hallways dim and threatening. Candles lit the way.

“Is it ‘cause I’m poor?” She whispered it to Jim. Her heart beat strong and mean.

“What?” He squinted at her in the gloom. “Aw, shut up.”

“You shut up!” Joyce stuck her pointed elbow in his chest, and Jim winced away, clutching at his side. “I saved this nickel and I can pay for myself. So you’re gonna shut up and take it.”

He spoke hotly. “I’m not gonna take your stupid nickel, Joyce.”

“You’re being an ass,” she said. “A dumb hairy man ass.”

It was the sort of thing her mother liked to say whenever Pop forgot to come home at night, which was most nights those days. He didn’t come home and some nights Mom was mad about it and some nights she cried about it, and some nights Mom had a couple of drinks and she’d sit at the table with a cigarette and she’d look at Joyce with

those big bruises around her eyes, Mom with her tired out eyes, and she'd tell Joyce, don't you ever trust a man. They don't ever love you.

So Joyce called Jim an ass and he flushed in the dark. Joyce didn't see it but boy, oh, boy, he felt it, all that blood in his face. He was shorter than her then, that one long, awful year when Joyce stood taller than him. Somewhere during the summer the look of her finely boned face, all thin cheeks and dark eyes, had started to make his gut churn. In her sweater, in the church, her wrists stuck out, and they were pale and bony.

"Look, I'm the guy," he said, and as he said it his gut started making butter, churning over and over. He said it real low and real fast because saying it out loud like this to Joyce made the skin at the back of his neck prick up. "I'm supposed to pay for a girl. Okay? I'm not *vacant*."

"You only pay if it's a date!" she said. Her heart was beating fast up in her ears now. She thought: what if it was a date? What if Jim thought it was a date? He'd asked her to go to the haunted house yesterday after school, and she'd said yes 'cause she liked scary stuff, and Jim had grinned so big his squaring jaw had gone lumpy.

He said:

She didn't let him say anything. She shoved the nickel slam-bam in the center of his chest and it fell to the carpeted floor where it didn't make any sound and she said, "I don't need you to pay for me, Jim," because she couldn't stop thinking about that beat-shit coat and how Jim had fiddled with the straps of his bag and said, "Hey, Joyce."

Joyce turned away and stomped ahead of him. She felt like a nimrod doing it but she did it anyway. She hadn't pulled her hair back so if anyone looked at her they could've seen she was red in the face and her eyes were stinging. At least it was dark. She walked as fast as she could in her too tight knock-off Mary Janes, right past the first demon (meant to teach her about Respecting Her Parents).

The second demon, who stood for Coveting Not Thy Neighbor's Wife (And Other Belongings), gave her a shock, though, when he jumped out of the candlelit alcove and tried to grab her bag from her. By the

time she got to the demon of Telling The Truth, Joyce had started to enjoy herself. There was a delicious thrill to the work of being scared, of staring goggle-eyed at the red, red props and running from the flickering, back-lit paper flames of hell.

Jim caught up as she got to the fourth scene (Don't Worship False Gods, Especially Those Of Celluloid And Radio). His gold-brown hair was all messed up like he'd scratched at it. He stood by her, close enough their arms might have touched if she leaned in. She didn't lean in. Silently he opened his hand to her. The nickel sat in the center of his palm. He closed his fingers around it and stuffed the nickel in his pocket.

Joyce looked at him as he looked at the play-act before them, the slightly balding, devil-tailed Frank Sinatra crooning a youth group down the wicked, wayward path. Jim's eyes, those blue things, flicked down and then up to the show, then at last at Joyce.

They were eleven, then. Yes. Just a couple of kids in 1952. In a year and a half her dad would leave them for a gal in Cincinnati, and Joyce's mom got thin and bitter and sad, Lord, she got so sad, single mom in the 1950s with a wild girl who wouldn't listen, Christ, Joyce, won't you just listen? You gonna run away from me like your pop did? And a few years after that, around Easter in 1958, Jim's mom would die after losing control of her car in the rain and driving it right into a tree. Boy, if he thought his dad was a drunk before that. Sayonara.

Joyce and Hopper would date for a few months in their sophomore year of high school, four good months during which Joyce would trust him and Hopper felt like how Superman must've felt holding a car up over his head, and it didn't matter that Hopper spent more time living out in the woods with his grandpa than at his own home, or that Joyce's mom had started to drink, too, and to miss her shifts at the diner.

Then they'd have a fight, a nothing fight, because Hopper was already dreaming about moving out of Hawkins, out of Indiana, but Joyce, she didn't want to leave Hawkins; she wasn't going to *run away*. And now here comes Lonnie Byers, moving to Hawkins from big shit Chicago to live with his aunt, Lonnie in his leather jacket and

with his own car, slicking his hair back and smiling just as smooth. Hopper, he wanted to leave, to get the fuck out of Hawkins, but Lonnie, oh, Lonnie, he left the city for Hawkins, quiet Hawkins where the kids had dreams and the parents all drank themselves to death.

But the haunted house, that was in 1952. That was before Cincinnati, before Easter of ’58, before that one summer night in freshman year when Joyce took the cigarette out of Hopper’s mouth and leaned across the front seat of his hand-me-down, brakes-don’t-work-so-well truck and kissed him on the mouth, and he carried that kiss around inside him for ages and ages until they started dating for real and it turned out she'd had that kiss banging around inside her too.

They were just kids in 1952. Hopper was going to be a country music star and Joyce was going to be in scary movies with her hair dolled up, wearing flirty dresses and nice-fitting shoes with high heels. No Vietnam for God and country, no double shifts at Melvald’s, no Sara spending Christmas in the hospital with tubes up her bruised arms, no Lonnie calling Will a queer boy. You could be just about anything you wanted in 1952.

All Joyce wanted was for Jim to be her friend, not a boy who paid a nickel so she could get into the haunted house at the Presbyterian church (and adjoining house) on Lincoln. Jim just wanted Joyce to smile. He liked it when she smiled. Lately she hadn’t smiled as much, like she was starting to know something about the world that he didn’t know and it wasn’t a thing that made you smile.

She smiled then. She took his hand. They smiled at each other as the youth group begged the Lord for mercy but ol’ blue eyes, he laughed and told ‘em it was what they got.

She said, as they moved on to the next holy horror, “What’re you gonna buy with that nickel?” and he said, “A hundred dollars,” and Joyce laughed so hard that Jim’s jaw got all lumpy as he grinned.

We’re friends, she thought; and she was so relieved to think it. She didn’t know then that you could kiss someone and still be friends with them, that you couldn’t love someone without being friends with them too. Shoot, Jim didn’t know it either. He thought loving someone meant breaking your heart for them, and Joyce, she thought

loving someone meant they'd break your heart.

So she thought, we're friends, and it gave her back her laughing for that night, enough so that when they came, near to last, to another demon, a demon that warned of adultery and the vitality of abstinence, she said "Boo!" in Jim's ear and when he turned to roll his eyes at her she put her hands on his shoulders and kissed him – smack! – on his lips.

That was their first kiss, hers and his. He spluttered in the wake of it. She left her hands on his shoulders even as she grimaced as though he'd tasted foul.

"What was that for?"

"Trick or treat," she said, smiling.

A couple of lollygagging teens started to whistle, and Joyce said, "Let's get out of here, it's not scary anyway," and Jim said, "What was that anyway," and Joyce said, "A trick," because it was funny, see, they were just friends and it wasn't a date, ha ha ha.

"So what's the treat?"

"Buy a coffee with the nickel," she suggested.

They didn't hold hands as they left the haunted house. They were laughing, though, and Joyce pretended to be a witch, and Jim was a man she'd cursed to be a werewolf, and the cold only bothered her a little.

Joyce didn't forget the kiss so much as she didn't think about it much after that. Cincinnati was coming along the line, Cincinnati and the diner job she'd start working in high school to pick up the slack at home when Mom drank and slept more than she left the house.

Hopper, though, he thought about it, maybe not so much in Vietnam or after he got married. But it was always there, yeah, a little scrap of 1952. Back when he was Jim, and Joyce was a few inches taller than him. Maybe it meant something. Maybe it didn't. But there it was anyway.